



**OWL'S FAIR**  
**Zenina Masters**



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The snowy owl picks up a bear in the Crossroads bar, and both follow their instincts.

Ezmerelda has just suffered through two indignities. The first was her thirtieth birthday and the second was the lineup of suitors that her father brought along as guests to the party.

Her friend Krisia offers her a chance to stop her family from fixing Ezzy up at every opportunity. With depressing honesty her friend tells her that she needs to go to the Shifter's Crossroads and find herself a mate.

The transporter sends her through the magical portal to the place where shifters go as a last resort when they

can't find a mate of their own. The  
Crossroads.

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## Owl's Fair

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Owl's Fair  
Shifting Crossroads Book 1  
By  
Zenina Masters



*To my sister, Teresa, who has a surprising clarity of thought when inspired by Sleemans. Though she couldn't stop laughing when I told her the bear's name, she will eventually get over it...I think...I hope...maybe.*

## Chapter One

It was a great day, an amazing day, a birthday that would live forever in the traumatized minds of the men at the county fair by the time the dream team of Krisia and the birthday girl herself, Ezzy, left.

Ezmerelda Atkinson had had a great day, and as she clutched the stuffed something or other that she had won at the ring toss booth, she eyed her family home with trepidation.

“Are you sure you have to bring me here? I would be happy to go back to the carnival and whip around the ferris wheel a few more times.”

Krisia swallowed. “I am not

generally airborne at any time day or night, so I will file that one under *how much do you want to see those corn dogs?*”

Ezzy chuckled and got out of the subtly stylish sedan. “You had better come in.”

“I promised your family I wouldn’t stay long, but sure. I will watch you blow out your mouse cake.” Krisia smirked as she left her car.

Ezzy shuddered. “I hope they didn’t. It wasn’t funny when I was eighteen—it is definitely not funny now.”

As they approached the house, they veered to the side and walked around back. Shifter gatherings were held outside as often as possible, and Ezzy’s

birthday was no exception.

Ezzy heard a ping and saw Krisia tuck her cell phone back into her bra. The birthday girl sighed. “You just had to, didn’t you?”

Krisia shrugged. “They asked me very politely.”

As they rounded the corner, Ezzy’s family screamed, “Happy Birthday!”

She flinched and tried to smile, but the three strangers clumped on the edge of the gathering sent up her warning signs.

Her father rushed her and gave her a hug. “Ezmerelda, happy birthday. I have some men I would like you to meet.”

“Dad, I don’t want to be fixed up

with anyone.”

“Ezmerelda, you are thirty now. You need to find a mate and have little ones. It is your duty as the eldest. You know Doria has her mate picked out. They are only waiting for you to be matched first.”

She whispered in her father’s ear. “It is an antiquated tradition.”

He leaned back and stared into her eyes. “But it is still our tradition.”

Ezzy blinked and sighed in resignation. “Fine. But I want to hug everyone else before I meet those guys. They don’t look like that much fun.”

Her mother came up and gave her a birthday hug. “Give them a chance. You might be surprised.”

Ezzy grumbled. “Fine, a chance is all they get.”

Screwing a pleasant expression on her face, Ezzy set out to greet the guests and meet the men that her father had found for her. *How bad could they be?*

Ezzy sat and held out her wine glass while Krisia filled it for the third time. Her shudders were gradually fading.

“I am sorry those guys were so creepy. I am sure your father meant well.” Krisia sipped at her soda and tried to look encouraging.

“I am sure he did, too—that is why this is so depressing. If these are the only guys he can find to be remotely interested in me, I am doomed, and I am

taking my little sister with me to disaster.”

Krisia looked from side to side and leaned in, trying not to be heard by the supernatural hearing surrounding her. “Have you thought of the alternative?”

Ezzy blinked in her wine-fuddled state. “Switching teams? Sorry, you are not my type.”

Kris waved her hand. “Don’t be stupid. No, I mean the…” she leaned in and whispered, “Crossroads.”

Nineteen shades of blush ran through Ezzy’s body. “Isn’t that a little… extreme?”

“More extreme than going lesbian?” Kris’s deep brown eyes were amused.

“Fair point. The problem is that I

don't know anyone who has gone to it. I don't want to be the first in the family.”

Kris stood. “Stay here for a moment.”

Ezzy watched her friend cruise through the crowd and grab a couple. With the same speed, Kris returned with Aunt Aglia and Uncle Stephano in tow.

Kris faced the shifters with a lack of fear that Ezzy's family found perplexing. Ezzy knew that her friend was a magic user, but few, if any, of her family shared that little secret.

“Tell her where you met.”

The demand made Ezzy's favourite aunt blush and her uncle wrapped his arm around his wife. Stephano smiled



down at Ezzy. “We met at the Crossroads. I was staying at the avian hostel for males, your aunt was at the one for females, and we met over coffee and pie at the café. We found a quiet place to talk, and after a few days, we showed each other our shifted forms. We came home, announced our engagement, and I moved here so your aunt could remain near her family.”

There was a wealth of innuendo in that description, but it left an impression on Ezzy. This was the one couple she would model her own relationship on if she could.

“Where do I go?” The words were out before she could stop them.

Kris smiled. “I can give you the

directions to the travel agent. She will brief you on the wherefores and details, as well as setting up your room in the hostel or a bed and breakfast.”

Ezzy embraced her aunt and uncle before settling back and staring at her friend. “How do you know so much about this?”

Kris snickered and dug in her vest pocket for a business card. “Take this to the address in the morning, and you can start making arrangements for the rest of your life.”

Ezzy took the small card and stared at it. “Do you know the travel agent?”

Kris smirked, “All of us human magic users know each other. We even

have a newsletter.”

Ezzy sighed and twisted her shoulders.

“You want to fly, don’t you? So, go. I will be here when you get back.” Kris put her feet up and snickered.

Ezzy couldn’t hold back any longer. She tucked the business card for Enchanted Travel in her pocket and gave her friend’s hand a squeeze. Her more sober family members followed her into the woods, and in a quick shuffling of clothing, they took flight.

The parliament of Atkinson was in the air, and the night was sweet to Ezmerelda’s feathers as her snowy white wings slowly gained her altitude while she worked her way to the treetops for a

flight with her family on this momentous birthday.

Her shift-sharpened gaze caught the movement of a mouse, but the freedom of flying over her family's forest was far more of a draw than her instinct to feel the small body beneath her talons.

Their flight was silent, but nothing had to be said—they were shifters doing what they were born to do with the best of company.

Ezzy screeched, and her family took up the cry as they banked and circled the forest. Her sister's small brown body darted past her, and Ezzy couldn't resist. The race was on.

Two hours passed while they played

tag in the branches of the oak forest.

When her blood was humming happily and her sister's feathers were fluffed in every place that Ezzy had caught her, the birthday girl returned to her clothing and her patient friend.

In the morning, she would go to the travel agent and learn what she needed to about going to the Crossroads. Family was great, but she wanted someone all her own.

## Chapter Two

Nerves were jangling, but Ezzy was confident that she could do this. It would have been easier if Kris could have helped her, but it wasn't good to have a witness for this sort of thing—at least that was what Kris said when she dropped Ezzy off at her home.

The building that the travel agent was in was a standard office building. Shrugging, Ezzy got into the elevator and made it up to the fifth floor.

She wiped her hands on her jeans, dragged in a deep breath and surged through the door with the number five on it.

Krisia was sitting at a desk with a

number of pamphlets in front of her.

“Good morning, how may I help you?”

    Ezzy’s mouth opened in shock.

“You? The travel agent to the Crossroads is you?”

    “Of course it is. My family has been sending shifters to the Shifter’s Crossroads for generations.” Krisia chuckled. “Please, take a seat.”

    Surprise was rippling through her with a hefty dose of confusion. “Why haven’t you ever mentioned it?”

    “You keep your shifter stuff to yourself. I keep my magic to myself. We agreed on that when we were nine.” Kris grinned again.

    Ezzy sat in the client chair and ran through the moment in her mind.

*With her first change just behind her, Ezzy was smug with her newfound talent. “I am not allowed to talk about it though. My mom said so and Grandma agreed. They never agree.”*

*Krisia sat and frowned. “But we tell each other everything.”*

*“I can’t. I can’t talk about the shifting stuff. Can we still be friends?” It was more of a test of their friendship than when Ezzy had challenged Krisia to eat a bug.*

*“If you can’t talk about shifting stuff, then I won’t talk about magic.”*

*Krisia stuck her hand out and they shook on it. “No shifting, no magic.”*

*The veil of silence had lasted*



twenty-one years. Krisia smiled. “No shifting, no magic.”

Ezzy looked at her oldest friend in the universe. “I am guessing that I got the short end of that deal.”

Kris laughed and waved her hand. A chocolate mocha latte appeared in front of Ezzy.

“Now, Ms. Atkinson, what would you like to know?” Smiling but formal, Kris waited.

Ezzy touched the hot sides of the cup and took a sip. “What can you tell me about the Shifter’s Crossroads?”

Kris touched the blotter on her desk, and a map appeared under her palm. “The first Shifter’s Crossroads was designed over a thousand years ago.

When shifters wanted to run away and find a mate that spoke to their hearts rather than their family connections, they needed a safe place to meet that person. They paid one of my people to come up with a solution, and we did. Some call it a place out of time, others an inter-dimensional space. I just call it nifty.”

The map was laid out in a simple design, a basic crossroads with buildings set along each wide path. It appeared to be about twenty miles square but the occupation was all within the central mile.

Ezzy sipped at her cup. “How does this work?”

“Ah, you decide on your form of pay,

and we agree on a price. You give me the price, and I send you to the Meditation Centre.” Kris smiled pleasantly.

“But, where do I go, what do I do?”

Kris leaned in and explained the Meditation Centre, the café, bakery and bar.

“The bar is where you will meet most of your likely candidates. Some may be in the bakery or café, but there won’t be many other options for introduction.”

“Where do I stay?”

“When you arrive at the Meditation Centre, they will take you on a tour of the buildings. A mated pair, a raven and swan, run the centre. If they are getting

along, you will get home with no trouble, but if they are fighting, you might have a wait.

“They will take you to either one of the bed and breakfasts, or if you prefer, the hostel.”

“What is the difference?”

Kris leaned back, “Price and visibility. Everyone knows you if you are at a B&B, but few take notice of another female at the hostel. The hostels are arranged so that males and females are separated, and then divided by the type of shifter you are. You would be in the avian hostel if you chose to go that way.”

“Why are the bed and breakfasts

more visible?”

“It is a small town with only four dozen permanent residents. Everyone knows everyone else’s business, and folk staying in the B&B’s have money to spend and don’t care who knows it. Since you want to fly under the radar, you have a decision to make.”

Ezzy thought about it for a moment. She wasn’t poor, but she didn’t want to spend money she didn’t have to. “Hostel for me.”

Kris flicked her fingers and a translucent computer was generated. “Excellent. The avian hostel is almost empty, so you will have most of it to yourself. I also want to warn you that it is not peak time right now. There will be

sparse selections to pick from, but those who are there will be rather determined to find females of their own. Are you ready for that kind of pressure?”

Ezzy closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she had settled her interior conflict. “If I am going to do this, I will do it now. Waiting will not help my case, and my father may bring even more appalling specimens for introduction.”

“A very valid point. Those guys were extra creepy.” Krisia shuddered, “Not that they bothered speaking to me. They just gave off a terrible aura, one especially.”

Ezzy was amazed. Not only was she learning about her chances to find a mate

on her own terms, but she was finding out that her best friend for decades had skills that she had arrogantly dismissed. “I feel like an idiot.”

Kris laughed. “Don’t. As I realized that my skills were more versatile than yours, I began to watch your world with fascination. Oh. I can also do this.”

As Ezzy watched, her friend formed a number of balls and began to juggle power in front of her. She laughed so hard that she was bent double before Kris let the energy dissipate with a sharp pop.

“Okay, enough fun and games. When do you want to leave?” Kris shifted from bragging to business in a heartbeat.

“Um. I have this weekend off, so

Friday afternoon?”

Kris grinned. “Calling off movie night to get your destined mate? Fine, but you owe me one.”

The magical travel agent kicked into high gear. “Do you understand the price that you will have to pay for sending you to the Crossroads?”

“Um, no. What is the price of the hostel?”

Kris grinned, “The price of the hostel is fixed and will be charged to your credit card, as will any meals you consume or clothing that you buy. No, I was referring to the price you have to pay me to transport you.”

Ezzy blinked in surprise. “I hadn’t



thought about it.”

“Most don’t. It takes energy to use magic, just like it takes energy to shift shape. We need a little something to make the transition work.”

Knowing that her friend would not demand more than she could give, Ezzy asked, “What do you need?”

“Three feathers from you and your immediate family.” Kris smiled. “It is how I will open the portal to let you through. Your feather will open the door, and your family’s feathers will keep you from getting lost.”

Uneasy, she asked, “Do they have to know about the feathers?”

Kris waved her spectral computer away. “No, they do not need to know

about the feathers. They are for tracking purposes only.”

“Fine. What time on Friday?” She was biting her lip. Nerves were taking hold, and her hands were shaking.

“After four. You get off work at two, and you need to have a few stiff drinks in you before I send you off.”

Ezzy snickered. “It seems strange. I have never gone for drinks with my travel agent before.”

“Yes, you have. You just didn’t know it at the time.”

They giggled together to burn off the nerves of the moment. In a few short days, Ezzy was going off to find the man for her, and Krisia was the woman who

was going to send her there. There was no one she trusted more.

## Chapter Three

With a weekend bag packed with everything Ezzy thought she needed, she sat in the chair across from Krisia once again and waited for her to check the feathers.

Kris smiled as she ran the white feather across her palm. “This is yours. You are a snowy owl. Very pretty. I don’t think I have ever seen you up close before. I swear, I will never figure out the way that magic shifts in bloodlines. With only few exceptions, the changes run along the same species but not the same genus. Well, that is the power of the planet for you. You can never tell who is going to get what by parentage.”

The smaller feather was Doria's. She'd shed plenty while they were playing during the flight. The last was one of her father's. He had been preening and yanked it out after the party. Making up the excuse to go visiting her parents' home was awkward, but getting into the forest to collect the feathers had been a nightmare of subterfuge.

Well, her parents were suspicious, but she had the feathers she needed. "What do you use the feathers for?"

Kris winked, "Flight spells. Owl feathers are used for silent flight."

"Seriously? You seriously use the feathers for spells?"

“Yup. Some folks can fly using chants or sheer power, but others need a boost from a potion, talisman or unguent.” Kris carefully arranged the feathers on a sheet of paper and walked them to the other side of the room. A slow caress of her fingers and a drawer slid out.

Ezzy watched her tuck the feathers away, looking eagerly until the drawer was closed and her feather was gone. “What now?”

“Well, I have you registered at the hostel and your meals are covered anywhere at the Crossroads. You need to wear this bracelet and all charges will be confirmed and recorded here. Do you

have any questions before I send you off?”

Putting the bracelet on, she swallowed nervously. “Dozens, but I think I should just go before I change my mind. Should I call you when I arrive or something?”

Kris grinned, “You don’t have to. I will know if you make it, but be sure to call me if you don’t end up coming back here. I will need to know what to tell your family, or at least how to distract them.”

A dozen moments of Kris hiding her from her family ran through her mind. “You are good at it.”

“Everybody needs a hobby.”

Nervous, Ezzy got to her feet. “So,

what do I do?”

“Grab your bag and stand here on this mark.”

Breathing quickly, Ezzy grabbed her small suitcase and stood on the mark.

“What now?”

“I wish you luck, I wish you joy and I wish you love.” Krisia stood in front of her, and her eyes began to glow.

Ezzy’s vision blurred for a moment, followed by a sudden tug at her limbs that made her stumble. Hands caught her, and she was looking into the eyes of a woman with snow-white hair.

A man stood nearby, his hair as dark as the woman’s was light. Both had the scent of shifters. He smiled softly.



“Welcome, Ezmerelda Atkinson, to the Crossroads.”

“That’s it? That’s all that it took to get me here? I didn’t really feel anything.”

The woman chuckled. “Transporter Vehn is excellent. Not all the Transporters take such an interest in their client arriving in one large piece. Do you have your medallion?”

Ezzy lifted her hand, showed the bracelet and nodded. “This?”

“Yes—it will shift with you if you choose to shift, but its true purpose is so that your incidentals can be charged directly to the funding set up for you.” The woman smiled. “I am glad to see your Transporter was on the ball.”

“She has a vested interest in my success.” Ezzy chuckled and lifted her bag. “Um, where do I go and what do I do?”

The woman smiled again. “I am Teal, Guardian of the Crossroads. That is my mate, Tony. He’s the other Guardian. He wrangles the males, I work with the females.”

Ezzy followed her as Teal began to move out of the building made of smooth, pale wood.

“You arrived in the Meditation Centre, and as you can tell, we are central to the Crossroads.”

There was nothing closer to the truth. The north-south, east-west roads met at

the base of the steps leading down from the centre.

“That building is the café, the one across from us is the general store, the Crossed Stars Bar is half a mile down the north road and across from it are the bed and breakfasts. You are in the hostel, so we will take you to the avian reserve.” Teal’s voice was brisk but cheerful.

Ezzy tried to take it all in. “How many people are here right now?”

“Forty permanent residents and twenty-four guests. Six of the guests are in the B&Bs, and the rest are in the hostels. Boys on the right, girls on the left.”

“What keeps one side from straying

to the other?” Nerves were setting in, and Ezzy clutched her bag tightly.

“Magic. The original architects of this place were quite generous with their power. The hostels are completely safe and just crossing the street will make you safe from anyone following you if you are feeling insecure. Of course, we do also have law enforcement for the Crossroads. Anyone found harassing one of the guests would be summarily banned from this place.” Teal was amused.

“How often does that happen?”

“Not very often. The folk who come here genuinely want to start a new life with a new partner. That means they are

on good behaviour.”

“Where are the law enforcement officers to be found?”

“They are in the Crossed Star—they are the bouncers.” Teal waved her arm toward the bar.

“I am guessing that the bar is the hub of activity?”

“Pretty much. That, and the Crossed Heart Café.”

Ezzy let out a nervous giggle. “So, everything is crossed here?”

“That is the idea. We try and bring folk together who never would cross paths in their normal lives. The Transporters weed out those who are just tired of dating and select only the folks who need this place.”

“Is there enough call for that kind of thing?”

“Apparently. There has been a Crossroads operating on every occupied continent for the last thousand years.”

Teal was amused.

As their path took them past the commercial district a line of buildings on either side of the street indicated they were near the hostels.

“Each classification of shifters is in a separate building from the other females.”

Ezzy smirked. “So, there is little chance of being eaten by another woman looking for a male?”

“Very little. We have strict no-

combat rules between the guests of the Crossroads. This is a safe place to seek and find a mate—however, we are also not idiots, and we have attempted to mitigate all chances of a hostile interaction.” Teal smirked. “There are still a few fur and feather battles now and then, but we do try to remove the temptation.”

Now was the time for the question that was hopping up and down in her mind. “Can I shift and go flying?”

“Yes, this entire area is secure, but you do not have to mention your shifted body to your prospective mate. Nor does he have to tell you what his is until you are ready to commit. Relax, enjoy and remember, whatever happens in the

Crossroads, stays in the Crossroads until you leave and take your mate with you.” Teal patted her on the shoulder.

A quick introduction to the housemother for the hostel of the avian and Ezmerelda was on her own. *Oh, goody.*



## Chapter Four

The Crossed Heart Café was a glowing beacon to Ezzy's ravenous appetite. With some grim determination, Ezzy entered the cheerfully lit building and looked around.

A few heads turned as males noticed her entrance. A few females were dotted about, but Ezzy was looking to be alone.

She slid into the first unoccupied booth and sighed in relief when a male reading a newspaper occupied her field of view. All that was visible of him was his very large hands, and it made for quite a break from the hungry eyes of the other males in the café.

A cheerful waitress came by. "Good

evening, sweetie. Would you like a menu?”

Ezzy exhaled with a smile to match the young woman's. “Please.”

“Coffee?”

“Oh, yes, that would be wonderful.”

When the folded menu was presented, Ezzy stared at the selections until she was sure she had memorized the whole thing.

The man reading the newspaper had lowered it and was now looking at her with an intensity that sent her insides quivering.

When the waitress returned, Ezzy blurted out the first thing that caught her eye. “Cheeseburger and fries.”

The waitress looked at her with a

raised brow. “No salad?”

Ezzy shook her head. If she was going to have to brave a bar full of eligible males, she was going to need to do it on a full stomach.

The menu had been her only cover. Now that it was gone, she looked up, and her gaze collided with the warm brown eyes of the newspaper man.

His entire body had the look of a man who worked outdoors, and he worked there a lot. Huge shoulders, a serious jaw, determined nose and lush lips gave him a solid base, but it was his warm brown eyes under dark brown brows that held her attention.

She knew her eyes were a bright

gold that sometimes set folks off, but shifters took it as normal to see eyes that colour. Warm brown was a colour she'd always wished she had, and if she had any kids, it would be a far easier colour for them to live with.

The object of her attention smiled, and a furious blush broke on her cheeks. She quickly looked away, but the damage was done.

He calmly folded his paper, lifted his coffee and got to his feet. When he stood next to her, she could tell that his height was well over six feet. He had a lovely woodsy scent that clung to him, and even two feet away, it made her want to get closer.

“May I join you? I am waiting for my

own order as well.”

His voice was a low rumble, and she tilted her head to hear it better.

She debated the pros and cons for a moment and then nodded, “Please.”

His smile was amused, “Better to just jump in and get it over with, right?”

Ezzy blinked in surprise at his amusement. “Something like that. Have you been here long?”

He settled in across from her and accepted the cup of coffee the waitress delivered.

“Thank you, Tee.”

“You’re welcome, Buzz.” The waitress smiled and walked away.

He turned back to Ezzy and said, “I

have been here about three weeks.”

Ezzy bit her lip to stop her smile, “Your name is Buzz?”

“It’s a nickname, but it does the job. What is yours?”

“Ezzy. It also does the job.” She snickered.

“And we have one point of commonality, excellent.” His laugh was genuine.

He relaxed, and she took in his graceful sprawl while sipping at her coffee. His t-shirt was stretched over masses of muscle, and his curling black hair brushed the collar in back. The open expression on his face helped her unclench a little.

“How many women have you sought

commonality with?” The words blurted out before she could stop them. A blush ran up her hairline as he raised a brow in surprise.

“How long have you been here?”

“I got here about an hour ago. I am sorry if it was a rude question.” She was rescued by the arrival of her cheeseburger, and she immediately dove in.

“Well, I am happy to be your first contact, but if we are not meant to be, you will go on beyond me, and I will continue past you. It is simply how things work in the Crossroads. We are here to find a mate, and to do that, we have to give up the idea of falling in

love with the first person we see.” His expression suddenly went grim.

Ezzy used a napkin to tidy her mouth before she spoke. “Personal experience?”

Buzz nodded. “So, what drove you here?”

“My best friend. She knew that I was desperately unimpressed with my father’s choices for me, so she sent me here.”

“She sent you? That is highly unusual. Did she find her own mate at the Crossroads?” His curiosity was genuine.

“Um...no. My best friend is a Transporter.” Ezzy worked her way through the surprisingly good burger,



stopping for the occasional fry dipped in ketchup.

“You’re kidding.”

“I am not. She and I had an agreement never to discuss our other lives, so when she saw how desperate I was, she gave me a card and had me meet my Transporter at her office. I had no idea it was her until I went through the door.”

“I’m still getting around the idea of a shifter having a magic user as a best friend. How long have you known her?”

Ezzy chuckled and settled into an easy topic of conversation. Krisia had shared in hundreds of misadventures with her, and Buzz seemed interested in

how it all began.

“We met at school in grade one and have been best friends ever since.”

“How is it that you didn’t know that she was a Transporter?”

Ezzy laughed and finished her burger. “Just after my first shift, she started her Guild indoctrination. I wasn’t allowed to talk about my shifting, and she wasn’t allowed to discuss magic, so we decided that we simply wouldn’t talk about it, and we never did.”

Buzz tilted his head. “It sounds difficult.”

“It was horrible. When I mastered my shape, I wanted to tell her, and I couldn’t. I would see her start a conversation about why her eyebrows

were scorched, and she couldn't. It was a test to our friendship that I'm very glad we passed."

She watched him rub his jawline and noted the five o'clock shadow that was appearing on his chin. "What about you—what drove you to the Crossroads?"

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck before drinking his coffee. "The area I live in is rather sparsely populated. There were few eligible women and even fewer that held any appeal for me. It was time for me to seek out a mate, and so, here I am."

She snickered at what he left unsaid. "Your parents as well?"

He grinned. "Yes. You are very

perceptive.”

She shrugged, “That one is obvious when you have experience with it.”

She nibbled at her fries as they sat in companionable silence. Outside, night was fully in control, and her inner wings ached to fly through the darkness.

“Your form is nocturnal?” His words were polite, but she could tell he wanted to know what she became when she embraced her inner magic.

“It is. Yours?”

“Not particularly.” He shrugged.

She sighed and wondered if he was something small and annoying. It seemed unlikely. His sprawl was far too natural, and he took up every inch of space he occupied. Folk who changed into

smaller animals tended to give it away in their body language.

The waitress, Tee, returned with a smile and took the plate away. “Can I interest you in dessert?”

Ezzy shook her head. “Thank you, but no. I think I need a bit of a walk around the area to work off dinner.”

Tee winked and left her with Buzz.

The man smiled and leaned forward, “May I offer you a nocturnal tour of the Crossroads? It is quite spectacular at night.”

This was the moment of no going back. If she said yes, she was going to immerse herself in the Crossroads until she came out with a mate. If she said no,

she still had a chance to run back to her normal life and pretend that this hadn't happened.

“I would like that.”

He got to his feet and held out his hand, and before she could change her mind, she put her fingers in his grip. As his embrace tugged her from her seat, she admired the rough warmth of his fingers. A woman would know that his hands were on her, and Ezzy was wondering if the rest of her skin would be as appreciative as her fingers were.

It was something worth checking out.

## Chapter Five

Buzz tried to keep his calm as his body reacted violently to the feel of Ezzy's hand against his. The moment he'd seen her walk into the café, his cock had kicked the inside of his jeans.

Three weeks of simpering women rubbing against him without invitation left him a little disgusted at the process of the Crossroads. He had sought out the café as a refuge, and to his delight, a woman who sang to his senses had cautiously stepped into his range.

Ezzy was cautious, and her face lit up when talking about her friend. That kind of loyalty was admirable, and her body wasn't bad either. Dark brown hair

cascaded down to her shoulders, a cute little bow of a mouth kept his attention when she spoke, and the few times she had made eye contact, the avian gold of her gaze had left him with no doubt that his companion had feathers when she chose to wear them.

When she stood up, her nose was even with his shoulder, the perfect height for him. The temptation to wrap his arm around her waist was intense, but he didn't want to scare her off. She seemed rather timid about her arrival at the Crossroads, and he didn't want her to regret allowing him to be her first escort around the grounds.

“Do you have night sight?” He asked her casually, as if his cock was not



gaining the imprint of his zipper as he spoke.

“I do, but there is plenty of light. Are the buildings glowing?”

“They are. It makes it easier for those shifters who do not have nocturnal navigation. It also makes the females feel safer. Less dark shadows or something.”

Ezzy looked up at him and smiled. Her nose crinkled as her lips curved upward, and it took all of Buzz’s self-control not to give into the bear inside him and maul her until she cried out for more.

“That does sound safer. What is that building over there?” Ezzy pointed with

her free hand, the side of one breast pressed against his arm, and Buzz closed his eyes for a moment.

“The Crossroads General Store. The family who runs it are beaver shifters, and they also take care of maintenance on the majority of the buildings.” He could feel his teeth sharpening with his growing arousal.

This tour was going to kill him.

\* \* \* \*

“What kind of shifter runs the bar?” Ezzy’s attention moved beyond the general store and to the bright light and noise of the bar. The sounds were not as harsh as she had anticipated, and there was something inviting about the light that spilled out.

“A tiger owns it, snakes are bartenders and a group of male lions act as bouncers.” His voice was low, and his words carefully pronounced. Ezzy winced as she realized that his arousal was beginning a partial shift. His scent had gotten more intense the moment they walked out of the café. He definitely was keying to her body. That much she could figure out. Her own pulse was rapid and had remained so with their hands in platonic contact.

Before she could change her mind, she pulled him to a halt. “Buzz. Wait a moment.”

He turned to her, a confused frown on his face.

She bit her lip, released it and went up on her toes to plant a kiss on him.

It started as a mashing of her lips to his, but his arms quickly steadied her, and she softened her assault. Her lips parted, and his matched hers motion for motion. She lapped at the interior of his mouth. A low throb began deep in her belly. He tasted as wild as his scent, and that was not a bad thing.

With a low, shaky groan, she broke the kiss and slowly let herself return to standing flat-footed. “Okay. That’s good to know.”

He appeared to be dazed, and with a smile, she knew that the blood was not currently in his brain. “What?”

“Whether I would like kissing you or not. I would. So, it was something I had to figure out before I wasted either of our time.”

Buzz’s blink was slow as he regained his wits. “Oh. Shall I continue the tour?”

“Please.”

With their hands still together, she leaned against his body while they walked. The Meditation Centre at night was quite lovely. The hostels were easily visible even to those who couldn’t manage well at night. The row that made her most curious was a series of neat, tall Victorians on immaculately manicured lawns. Buzz was walking her

down the lane, and she had to ask, “What are these places?”

“Bed and Breakfasts. When a male comes here who is old enough to be territorial, he takes a room at the B&B. It gives us a temporary territory and a feeling of security.”

His expression was wry. Apparently he was slowly getting over his shock over her kiss and that was a relief. He hadn't shoved her away, so the ridge she had felt below the waist was definitely not something in his pocket.

Ezzy moved a little closer to him as they passed a few folks on the wide walkway. “I thought there were only a few dozen seekers here at this time.”

Buzz's low voice made her lean

closer. “There are. What most don’t realize is that this entire area has a basic need for support staff. They live here all year round, and while some come and go, they do keep a standard population on hand. They live in these other houses. It keeps them away from the guests for the most part, though pairings do happen.”

“Are you staying in one of these buildings?”

“Yes, at the Open Heart B&B. Dira is the owner and operator, and I have to tell you, she must have some precognition. When I was going to give up on this place and return home, she convinced me that my mate might simply

show up in a day or two, but I was looking for her in the wrong place. I needed to ditch the bar and hang out at the café, and she would be here before I knew it.”

Ezzy swallowed. “When was that?”

“Yesterday. I had my bags packed and everything. It costs quite a bit to be returned home, but it was very tempting.” He stopped and turned her toward him.

She looked up into his dark eyes and what should have been frightening features in the strange glow of the buildings, but her inner wings opened wide. There was nothing to fear here.

“I am glad I stayed.” He leaned forward, and this time, his kiss was



exploring her lips, the honey of his mouth warmed her and made her crave more.

When he leaned back, she blinked up at him. His arms were around her, and his hands on her hips held their lower bodies together.

“I don’t do casual sex.” Her words were blurted out before she could stop them.

He smiled, and it was a slow and deep smile. “Nothing between us will be casual, Ezzy. I promise you that I take this most seriously. What would you like to see next?”

Ezzy listened to her heart and said the words that surged up into her throat.

“Your room.”

Once uttered, there was nothing left to be said. Buzz lifted her hand to his lips, placed it in the curve of his arm and walked slowly toward the Open Heart Bed and Breakfast.

## Chapter Six

Ezzy's heart was pounding in her chest as she walked up the stairs to the second floor with Buzz at her side. She was really going to do it. She was going to have sex with a man she had only just met. Krisia would be so proud.

“That is a fascinating smile. May I ask what prompted it?”

She giggled, “I was just thinking my friend would be so proud that I followed my instincts.”

“I must admit I'm quite happy you have.” His mouth curved in a smile. He paused in front of a door with a discreet number on it. A flash at his wrist and the lock clicked over.

“It is set to your talisman?”

“Yes, as your locker at the hostel is set to yours. Dira set the charm when I checked in.” He opened the door, and Ezzy preceded him into the room.

For a bed and breakfast, the room was huge. A desk sat along one wall and a wide window let in the night air and ruffled the smooth bedding on the king-sized bed. A door to what had to be the bathroom was discreetly closed.

When the door locked with a click behind her, her gaze flew to the window. She could ditch her clothing and jump into the night air, fly back to the hostel and be safe in her solitude. Ezzy breathed in and exhaled slowly. If she

could just get past her nerves, she could find out if Buzz was indeed the man for her.

“We can take this slow if you want...”

She didn't give him a chance to give her options. With a determined move, she whipped off her shirt, leaving her in her bra and jeans. She turned and pressed herself against him, reaching for his neck and pulling his head down to hers. “Before I lose my nerve,” was the whisper she murmured against his lips.

He didn't smile but whipped his own shirt off, exposing the lightly haired expanse of chest and an impressive array of muscle. “You know when this is over, we will have to talk a little more

thoroughly.”

She chuckled weakly as he took her in his arms and flesh pressed to flesh.

“Later.”

“Later.” His kiss sent her head spinning, and his wide, calloused hands caressed her back in a slow stroke that freed the clasp of her bra without pausing. He didn't discard the bra but sighed happily as his hand made a slow uninterrupted caress down her spine.

She gave herself up to him, body and soul, as his honeyed kiss sent her thoughts spinning and her body began to burn. Her clit throbbed, her sex felt swollen and hot, and it was hard to keep standing there as he leisurely kissed her

lips, stroking her tongue with his.

His body was hard under her touch, hot skin over iron muscle. Whatever he did for a living, it kept him in amazing shape. She idly ran her hands over his back, and a smile came to her mouth as he groaned and arched into her touch.

The simple touch on his spine made him grunt, writhe and twist to get more of her hands on him. She kept her exploration up, and as he moved against her, her breasts rubbed against the loose fabric of her bra that was finally enough of an irritant to discard.

He grunted and leaned just far enough back from her to let her remove the small barrier with its cheerful flowers and satiny fabric. The moment

they were back together, she groaned at the feel of heat and light abrasion that the hair and muscle of his chest provided.

She shivered and moved closer until their bodies were so close, not a whisper of air could get between them. Buzz moved to place kisses on her neck, and she clung to his shoulders for support as his lips and teeth made her weak in the knees.

His teeth had sharpened, so each graze had the effect of setting her heart pounding. She shivered in his arms, and when he moved beyond her neck toward her breasts, the angle she was forced into released a whimper from her.

“I think this calls for a change of



orientation.” Buzz’s voice was barely understandable. His teeth were visible and they were fearsome.

He lifted her, and with a quick move, he had peeled back the bedding and placed her against the pristine white pillows. His hands made quick work of her shoes, socks, jeans and finally the whisper of her panties.

She didn’t have time to be embarrassed—his own clothing was flipped to the floor with a few soft grunts, and then, he was on her. His mouth continued its exploration of her torso while his hands caressed her hips, belly and then one finger stroked her sex and parted her, letting loose a flow of liquid heat.

Buzz groaned and left her aching breasts in exchange for lying between her thighs and applying himself diligently to lapping up the honey that she was producing as her aroused tension kept her on the edge of release.

Ezzy threaded her fingers through his hair and held tight as her low moans turned into harsher cries and finally a shriek of release that echoed in her owl's voice.

Buzz growled happily, his tongue lapping at her, burrowing inside and then scooping out all traces of her flow. When her body stopped bucking against his mouth, he raised his head and moved up to face her again.

With deliberate motions, he licked his lips, and to her embarrassed amazement, there were no visible traces of her on his face. His hips parted her thighs, and she bent her knees to give him full access.

She met his dark gaze as he fitted the head of his cock to her and began to put his weight into it. He didn't slide in easily, but her body yielded slowly to the insistent pressure.

Looking up into Buzz's face, she watched the almost cruel intensity in his expression as he fit himself into her and began to move.

If he hadn't just gone out of his way to provide her with pleasure, she would

have run at that point, but because *ladies first* seemed to be his private theme, she was willing to face the frightening visage above her.

His shoulders blotted out the light coming through the window, but as he rocked against her, drawing back and thrusting forward with a delicious slowness, she ignored the call of the night in favour of what was happening inside her.

Her body was rapidly climbing back to the peak that he had brought her to before. Each slow thrust into her sent shivers through her body, and she let the whimpers flow free.

Ezzy clutched at his shoulders, and her fingers shifted into talons, holding

fast. Her lips parted, and she shrieked as her body came apart under him, around him.

A flicker of relief struck Buzz's eyes, and his thrusts picked up in pace until she was rocking violently with every hard shove, and he growled a low moaning growl as his cock pulsed inside her.

He rolled to his back and pulled her over him, bringing the covers over them both.

She inhaled the scent that their combined bodies had created and smiled as she rested her head against his chest.

*Perfect match.*

## Chapter Seven

Krisia was about to leave her office for the evening when a knock at the door froze her in place. She wasn't expecting anyone.

She scanned the door, and three male figures appeared, with canine in their systems. This was not good.

“I am closed for the evening—come back tomorrow.” It was a futile hope, but it got her to her desk where she pressed her panic button an instant before the door shattered.

Three half-shifted coyotes strode into her office and one took point.

“Where is she?”

Krisia formed power, but before she

could fire it, a clawed hand swiped across her face.

“I asked you, bitch, where is she?”

Her skin parted under his claws as he struck her again. She tried to remain flippant but it was getting harder.

“Who?”

“Your friend, the owl. Where is Ezmerelda Atkinson?”

She could smell his fetid breath on her skin as he lapped at the blood. With hands raised, she clawed at his face. One hand got lucky with hair, skin and blood. “Where she needed to be.”

He clawed her across the abdomen. “Human bitch, you sent her to the Crossroads.”

Her shirt was no match for his

claws, and blood spread across the fabric. Ruthlessly throttling down on her pain, she answered. "I did."

"Send me."

She spit blood at him. "No."

His companions moved forward and gripped her arms. There was now an unholy light in his eyes. "You will."

He used his claws on her until her clothing was dripping red.

When she looked up at him numbly as she dropped to her knees, she smiled. With one hand, she sent him where he wanted to go.

As his companions shouted in panic and power flashed around her, she knew that her help had arrived, and it was time



to rest. Ezzy had her mate, so it was only a matter of who was stronger, her new man or the insane bastard on the hunt.

“Rest easy, Krisia. You were badly beaten and lost a lot of blood.” The voice was calm and controlled, but there was a note of anger in it.

Kris opened her eyes and confirmed what her ears told her. Guild Master Tobias Orcross was working on her, healing her.

*Damn it.*

Kris looked down at her body, hovering at waist height for Tobias's ease. She was naked and covered with lacerations, but at least the bleeding had stopped. The two cohorts that had held her for the coyote's mauling were

wreathed in a swirl of dark energy that left them whimpering in pain.

Kris tried not to look up at Tobias. “Shouldn’t you be doing something official, Guild Master?”

He paused in his ministrations. “There is nothing more important than healing you, Krisia. You know that.”

She grudgingly met his clear blue gaze and winced at the sincerity she saw there.

“I know that you think it is. Why wasn’t someone else on my security duty?”

He sighed and sealed up a wound across her belly with an even touch and a small surge of healing energy.

Kris had to admit, Tobias was the one you wanted to heal you when you were injured. His talent came out in his hands.

“I assigned you to my care two years ago. The moment your alert came through, I was on my way, though it did take a while to locate your precise position. You have quite the hidden office.”

She grimaced as he stroked another hand down her hip, closing the red wounds and leaving pale skin in its place.

“I have the attacker in my hand if you are interested.” She tried to distract him, but he was intent on her body.

“It is a coyote named Anders. The Raven and the Swan have been alerted. Where did you send him?”

“The high ground. I wanted everyone to have as much time preparing as they could.” She pressed her lips together as his hand woke a sliver of pain.

“Good. I will tell the Guardians. They are having trouble finding Anders’s target. Do you know where she is?”

Kris tried to ignore the warmth that always accompanied his touch. “She is with her mate. That is all I know. I do not know where they are.”

“As you should be.” The chastisement in his tone was

unmistakable.

“You know my reasons.” She wanted to cross her arms over her breasts, but he was busy sealing her cuts in that region.

“They are foolish, and if your friend has truly found her mate, they now have no grounding in reality. You are free to be with your mate now, Krisia, and I believe I have waited long enough.”

There was anger in his angelic features, an expression she had seen only once before, a decade earlier when she had avoided his attentions at the rites of spring.

Kris blushed as he moved his hands over her from neck to thigh, testing the texture of her new skin. He had waited a

while to have his hands on her. That was obvious to both of them.

“I honestly thought you would move on to someone else, Guild Master.”

“There has never been anyone else but you since that day, Krisia. I had to take a willing partner, and since you dodged me that day, it had to be a volunteer. I never intended it to be your cousin.”

She winced. Ten years earlier, she had attended the rites of spring, her first as an adult and a Transporter. The seer had tapped her as the sacrifice of spring, the woman who had to have sex in public with the Guild Master. Krisia had refused the honour in the only way she

could think of—she ate everything she was allergic to and sought out poison ivy. In one hour, she went from a lithe sacrifice to a welter of pain and rashes.

In her place, the new Guild Master had to seal his link to the community with a volunteer. Her cousin Sara had stepped forward and filled the gap. Of course, Sara now was married with three kids, but back then, it had been a hurtful sight as the man she knew to be hers took her kinswoman in full view of the public.

“You know, if we were not what we are, this would be considered in poor taste. I mean, even the shifters don’t arrange marriages anymore.”

Tobias sighed. “Ours is not

arranged, it is destined. We can simply see who our true match is and their name and where they are located. It is a small enough gift for what we pay out with our talents.”

“Destiny sucks.”

He let out another gust of air. “You have dodged it long enough. With this attack, you have proved that you are not capable of defending yourself and keeping my mate safe for the future. You will come with me this evening, and tomorrow, we will formalize our union.”

“It still sucks. I was never even consulted on the matter.” She tried not to flinch as he worked on her face.

He cupped her jaw as his hand



sealed her final injury. His gaze was intense as he completed the healing. “I was not consulted either, but I am not complaining. It is the way our people have found their matches for centuries, and it is not up for discussion.”

She didn't have a chance to say a word—his fascinating mouth descended on hers and power wrapped them together as he swept them out of her bloodstained office and to the home of the Guild Master.

It was the place she most and least wanted to be, and she hoped with all her heart that Ezzy was having more luck than she was.

## Chapter Eight

Ezzy woke completely in the dark of the night. Something was wrong with Krisia, and she needed to go home.

With all the stealth of a nocturnal predator, she eased away from Buzz. Her body felt the caress of the moonlight, and with a swift move, she jerked open the window and leapt out. Her feathers wrapped her in an instant. The steady beat of her wings helped her approach the hostel in silence.

The avian hostel had a roof access, and she used it, shifting to her feet on the stairs. The urgency of wrongness surrounding thoughts of Kris didn't cease until she was at her locker and

getting dressed.

As quickly as the feeling of urgency began, it eased until there was nothing left. Wherever Kris was, she was no longer in danger. Ezzy leaned her forehead against the locker and debated her options. She could stay in tonight or try and get back to Buzz before he woke.

There was really no choice. She was heading back to the Open Heart.

The hostel was silent. She was the only avian occupant tonight, and since she had not checked in, there was no reason for the attendant to remain.

With her body still humming with fading adrenaline, she eased out the door and looked around. The streets were nearly silent.

The hair on the back of her neck rose in silent warning an instant before she was struck and thrown in a skid across the ground.

The scent of blood filled the air, but it was not Ezzy's blood, it was Kris's.

Ezzy got to her feet and faced her attacker. She was shocked to see Anders in a half-shift. "Anders. What did you do?"

"Your bitch Transporter should be dead by now. My pack mates have seen to it." His teeth gnashed and his voice was garbled, but she made out his words.

"You attacked a Transporter? You really are the dumbest thing on two or

four legs.” If her instincts were not telling her that Kris was alive and well, she would have been far more disturbed. Now, she was simply furious.

Her fingers turned to talons, and she charged him, drawing blood and sending him lurching backward.

A low roar sent Ezzy into overdrive, looking for the new attacker, but the enormous bear charging down the lane directly for Anders had no interest in her. The bear was as tall as she was, and it was crunching down on Anders’s arm as she watched.

A black raven landed nearby and shifted into Tony the Guardian with Teal shifting from her swan form a moment behind him.

Tony's hand shot forward, and Anders was torn from the bear's grip. Teal walked up to the bear and spoke quietly to him. He shifted into his normal form, and Ezzy was surprised to see Buzz staring at her.

“Why was the coyote after you?” Buzz's voice was still a low growl as he approached her, wearing nothing but the charm on his wrist. He hadn't been aroused until he began walking toward her, but now, his cock flared and filled until the heated length arced up to slap his belly.

“I said no. Apparently, that was enticement enough for him. He attacked Krisia.” She gave into impulse and

threw herself into Buzz's arms for comfort. He didn't disappoint her, wrapping her tightly in his arms.

Teal came to stand next to them.

“Your Transporter is fine. Well, she was attacked, and if she hadn't called a healer, she might not have made it, but she is in the hands of the Guild Master, and I don't think he wants to let her go any time soon.”

“Guild Master?” Krisia had never mentioned a male by that title, but Ezzy supposed that it had fallen under their silence pact.

Teal smiled. “Yeah, the equivalent of pack master for all of the Transporters and magic users. There has to be someone in charge or there would

be a lot more random zapping.”

“Oh. Is it safe here now?”

Teal and Tony nodded, “Everything is fine. He was the only rampaging coyote here this evening, and you were his target. You can return to your shelter for the night. We will send him back to face charges, as well as get the pulp of his arm seen to.”

Ezzy nodded against Buzz’s chest, inhaling his increasingly wild scent. “I can go back to the hostel then?”

Buzz gave her an irritated look, wrapped an arm tightly around her waist and simply walked with her plastered against him.

She held tight to his shoulders as he



walked them back to the Open Heart. “Is this a traditional bearish transport?”

He grunted, “We will discuss the details and rules of our other forms when we get back to my room. Right now, know that while the defense rage is subsiding, I was still not pleased to find you gone.”

“I felt that something was wrong with Krisia, and I needed to get to her. As soon as the feeling started, it stopped, but by that time, I had already gotten dressed and was ready to hit the Meditation Centre to get a transport home.”

His arms tightened around her to the point where breathing became a bit of a chore. “How would I have found you if

you had gone? I don't even know your name.”

She whispered in his ear,  
“Ezmerelda Atkinson, a snowy owl within the central parliament of owls. I am a clerk at Atkinson Inc., and I work on contracts for parasailing equipment. My best friend in the world is Krisia Vehn, Transporter.”

He grunted and relaxed his grip.  
“Thank you. Now, why was that coyote after you?”

“He was a male brought to my birthday party by my father, one of three actually. It was the spurring point for my coming here. Destiny had to have better taste.”

Ezzy felt Buzz's chest moving in a chuckle as they reached the lane near the Open Heart. The hard ridge of his erection slipped and slid against her belly with every step. It was exceedingly distracting.

She concentrated on the view of the surrounding area as he mounted the steps with her still clamped to him. With a soft giggle, she realized that she was the only thing he was wearing beyond his talisman.

The door to the Open Heart unlocked at their approach, and Buzz announced, "Thank you, Dira."

"You found your owl then?" The woman's tone was low and slow,

infinitely amused.

“I did. Ezmerelda, our hostess, Dira Montrose.” He turned so that she could see the woman over his shoulder, and to her shock, she was looking into the greenest eyes she had ever seen.

“It is good to meet you, Ezmerelda. It is always nice to have a first joining under my roof, so much safer than out in the woods.” The woman winked, and a cascade of black hair swung around her, to her knees. The woman was undoubtedly a shifter, but the amount of power she was carrying in her graceful frame was more than anyone Ezzy had seen before. Whatever she turned into, it could do some major damage.

“Pleased to meet you, Dira. Pardon

the method of our introduction.”

Buzz snorted.

“I have seen far worse, child. Now, get upstairs and learn your lover’s name before you lose your clothing again. I have sealed the window against escape of that nature again—it is unpleasant to watch guests jump.” The woman bowed slightly and turned her back to the couple. “Good evening to you both.”

Buzz mounted the stairs, and in under a minute, they were back in his room, and he was sliding her down his body. “I am Edgar Victor Northrup, owner-operator of the Northrup Survey and Mining Company, only son of Diane and Charles Northrup, and elder brother to

Ystine. I live in Alaska.”

Ezzy widened her eyes. “Northrup Survey and Mining?”

He scowled, “Yes. We are doing very well, and it is the primary reason I came to the Crossroads. I wanted a woman who wanted me for me, not for my name or company.”

She blinked, “Well, I wanted you before I knew who you were, but I am not sure that you will be happy with me if more psychos come out of the woodwork.”

He went to work to peel her clothing until her state of undress matched his. “Show me your other shape.”

Ezzy blushed and walked to the bed, crouching in the easiest position for her

shift. She stretched out her arms and let her feathers wash over her and then blinked at him from the carved wooden edge of the bed.

“You are lovely, Ezzy. You will have all the skies around my home as your own.”

He held out his arm, and she hopped onto it, fluffing her feathers as he lifted her for a closer look. It was the shifter equivalent of playing doctor. He tapped her beak, and she snapped at him, drawing blood.

“Ouch. Well done, Ezzy. Would you stretch your wings for me?”

She watched him as she stretched her wings, tilting them for balance as she

clutched his wrist for security.

She blinked her eyes as she realized he was taking in every nuance of her form, every inch of her feathers and each flick of black in her plumage. She clacked at him, and he smiled.

The dark strands of his hair slid as he turned his head this way and that. Her hunting instinct wanted to pounce on those strands, and it was then that Ezzy realized it had been far too long since she had allowed herself a hunt.

When he stroked her, her lids shuttered to half-mast. No one had stroked her feathers since she was a child and just learning her form. She had forgotten the deep pleasure and feeling of absolute trust that she had when she



let someone touch her animal shape.

He continued to stroke her from the tufts of her ears. A single finger trailed down her beak but did not tap it again. “Lovely, simply lovely.”

She preened, lifting her neck and fluffing her wings. Ezzy was disappointed when he set her down on the edge of the bed and stepped away. She reclaimed her human form and smiled. “I showed you mine.”

Buzz leaned forward and pressed a heated kiss to her lips, moving down her throat. With a groan, he backed away. “You certainly did. My turn.”

She watched breathlessly as he went from man to beast in a swirl of power.

“Oh my.”

## Chapter Nine

Her first glance of him outside the hostel had not driven home his impressive size. He was freaking huge.

Ezzy walked up to him cautiously, letting his other form scent her. His nose was wet and very insistent, so she parted her thighs to allow him access. The contact made her jump, and he huffed in complaint.

She placed her hands on his head for balance as he rubbed and snuffled his way up to her neck where he gave her a long lick. She giggled and shoved his head aside, digging her fingers into his thick fur.

It was brown, black and gold and

suited him very well. She moved out of range of his head and stroked her fingers through his fur, massaging the muscles beneath.

He let out a low groan and flopped onto the floor.

Chuckling, Ezzy moved to straddle him and stroked her hands down his shoulders, ignoring the feel of his fur between her thighs. With an evil grin, she transformed her fingers to claws and ran them along his skin.

The bear beneath her let out a low moan and his eyes closed.

She felt like moaning, herself. The position she was in with her breasts pressed into his slightly rough fur probably looked, but thankfully, there

was no one to see her splayed... “Is that a mirror?”

He buried his head in his paws and moaned as if injured.

Huffing in indignation and a lot of embarrassment, she crawled off him, gave his hindquarters a kick with her bare foot and crawled onto the bed and under the sheets. “That was exceedingly sneaky.”

He shifted from bear to man and crossed to her. “I apologize for the subterfuge, but my head doesn’t turn almost all the way around. I had to cheat to see you.”

Buzz crept into the opposite side of the bed and pulled him to her as if it was

the most natural thing in the world. Ezzy sighed and had to admit that it felt like they had done it forever.

His hand caressed her hip, and she closed her eyes as her body warmed to his touch.

“So, what do you think of me?”  
Buzz’s voice held a note of worry.

She chuckled and opened her eyes, letting her owl eyes take over from her human ones. “I think you are huge, warm, comfortable, and if I hadn’t seen the mirror, you would have seen exactly how much I liked the feel of your fur on me.”

He shuddered and kissed her. “Just the words I needed to hear.”

Buzz rolled her to her back and held

her hands next to her head while he covered her body completely. He shuddered again, and fur covered him from head to toe, only his eyes remaining visibly human. His cock remained unfurred as well, and for that, she was grateful as he parted her thighs and slid into her.

Instead of simply thrusting with his hips, he rocked his entire body against hers in a stroke that made her shudder as every inch of her came alive under him.

Ezzy wrapped her legs around his hips and enjoyed the different feel of his half-form fur. Silky and springy at the same time, it sent tickles of shock through the skin of her belly and the

sensitive peaks of her nipples. She shuddered as she grew closer to climax, her moans taking on her avian voice while her fingertips grew talons to try to grip his shoulders. His hands on her wrists kept her from him quite neatly.

She thrust up, craving more of the deep slide within her. Her hips arched, twisted, and he growled and grunted as he fought to subdue her thrashing body.

Ezzy drew her legs up as high as she could and smiled with what she knew was a wicked grin. If he wouldn't let her have her hands, she would simply use her feet. She shifted her feet into talons and dug them into his buttocks, holding him fast inside her.

He roared and his hips jerked



against her.

She felt a pulse inside her and laughed as his body shuddered.

He collapsed on her, and she released his body from her grip. She chuckled again.

“Why are you laughing?” His voice was hoarse but satisfied.

“I win.”

Her chuckles grew until she was laughing and clutching him tightly, her entire body back in human shape.

He groaned and rolled to his back, taking her with him but tucking her in so that the cooler air of the room did not give her a chill.

“I think you should meet my parents

and a formal bonding should be arranged.” His words penetrated the soft noises of their breathing.

Ezzy blinked and idly traced designs on his chest, swirling the soft curls of hair around his nipple. “I suppose that that was the point of this, wasn’t it?” She let out a soft laugh. “Funny, I have never thought beyond the finding of my mate. The happily-ever-after part never entered my mind.”

He started to laugh, a low, deep laugh that caused her to hang onto him or be tipped to the bed.

She leaned up and stared down into his face. “Why are you laughing?”

“I never knew where my mate would come from, but I have planned for that

moment all my adult life. For you, I have thought and planned.” He pressed a kiss to her temple.

She smiled at the sentiment, and then, her eyes widened. “You are misquoting *Persuasion*. You are a Jane Austen fan?”

He blushed and grinned, “My sister encouraged me to learn about being a romantic. Apparently, my practical approach to finding a mate was a little too direct. She gave me a collection of classic romances and told me to read and learn, so I did.”

“When was that?”

“Two months ago. It was after that that I contacted the Transporter and

waited for the window to the Crossroads.” He stroked his hand down her spine, cupping her buttock before trailing upward again.

“The what? Kris never mentioned a window.”

He paused his caress. “A window of power lines up with any particular Transporter, and they can move folk from our normal world to the Crossroads only at that time. For some, it is months, for others, days. It depends on the Transporter.”

She shrugged, “Since I told my family I was going camping for the weekend, I think meeting your family first might be the way to go. Mine didn’t know I was going to the Crossroads.”

He chuckled and stroked her back again. “They will figure it out when you come to live with me.”

She sighed and pressed her forehead to his chest. “I haven’t gotten that far in my plotting and scheming. It is tradition, I know. But, oh, damn. I wish I could talk this out with Krisia.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because I am here, and she is with the Guild Master, whatever that is.”

He sighed and sat up. “Well, dawn is here, so let’s have a shower, get some breakfast and ask the Raven and Swan to send us home. Or, to the Guild Master’s residence. If you will not settle until you have spoken with Krisia, you will speak

with her.”

Ezzy liked the idea, and when she stood in front of the mirror, she snickered. “Okay, the fur is fun, but I think we are going to have to keep it to the minimum.”

He laughed and turned, so she could see the marks she had made on his muscular ass. “Fair enough. No fur, no claws.”

She hissed in sympathy and approached him, running her hands down the slabs of muscle of his shoulders, kneeling behind him and kissing each puncture and gouge left by her talons.

When she had apologized to each one in turn, she got to her feet and winked at him. “Shower?”

He growled, lifted her against him and carried her into the bathroom. He set her in the shower and blocked the water until steam curled around them. “If I kiss each inch that was abraded, I am not sure that we would leave the Crossroads.”

Ezzy smiled up at him, memorizing the expression of lust and happiness on his face. They would fight in time—all couples did—but this was a moment she wanted to remember.

Once the sticky remains of sex were obliterated, he tenderly washed her hair, and she scrubbed his back in turn. When they were clean and vibrating with sensual tension, they towelled off and

returned to the bedroom.

Ezzy picked up the clothing she'd first arrived in as well as the clean underwear from a few hours earlier. In three minutes, she was ready for breakfast, and two minutes later, Buzz was packed and ready to leave.



## Chapter Ten

“Oh my god, what is in these biscuits?” Ezzy groaned happily.

Dira was sitting at their table at their invitation. She grinned proudly. “It is an old family recipe. The secret ingredient is butter.”

Buzz didn't bother asking about ingredients, he just snarfed down one after another covered in honey. How he could eat that much honey and still appear fit was beyond her, but his nickname was now becoming clear.

Bears liked honey, bees made honey, so buzzing was a side effect.

“Thank you for breakfast, Dira. I know it says it on the sign, but most

B&B's I have been to have nasty muffins and scones." Ezzy looked admiringly at the expanse of bacon, eggs, toast, muffins, beans, sausage, fruit salad and the tower of pancakes.

"Most shifters are big eaters. I take that into account." Dira chuckled and stabbed four of the pancakes for her own plate.

Buzz had ploughed through a third of the offerings, and he was going back in for more.

Ezzy usually dismissed the term *eat like a bird*, but she felt the comparison was apt, considering the company.

Dira was making serious inroads on her side of the table, Buzz was ravaging the contents of the platters on his side of

the table and Ezzy sat at the head of the table and ate the equivalent of two eggs, toast and bacon.

“Do you have a lot of guests?” Ezzy smiled as Dira quickly swallowed to reply.

“About two hundred per year. Folk come and folk go, but I remain here. There is no place for me in the outside world.” The woman’s brilliant green eyes were rather sad.

Ezzy nodded. With that much power, there would be a spectacle if Dira ever publicly shifted. She didn’t have the countenance of a small animal—she would be big, and the power would flow.

“You are checking out today, Buzz?”

Dira smiled.

“I am. Our next stop is the Meditation Centre, and from there, we will find out if Tony and Teal take requests.” Buzz’s words were completely comprehensible, which was amazing considering his mouthful of food.

Dira raised a dark brow, “You have an alternate destination?”

Ezzy finished her plate. “I need to talk with my friend, and she is no longer at home.”

“Where is she?”

“At the home of the Transporter Guild Master.” Ezzy sipped at her

coffee. “Do you know it?”

Dira blinked. “The Transporter Guild Master, or *The* Guild Master? They are different people.”

Ezzy frowned. “I don’t know. Teal would. She is the one who told me about it.”

“Fair enough. They will get you where you need to go.” Dira finished her meal and picked up her own coffee. “Nothing like good food and good company. It was an honour hosting you, Buzz, you as well, Ezmerelda.”

“I was only here overnight, and only part of that.” Ezzy’s blush was intense.

“Love warms the heart of the building whenever it rests here. It doesn’t matter how long it was here, a

true match leaves a positive mark on its surroundings.” Dira had a wistful smile on her pristine features.

“Have you ever found your mate?” It was a personal question, but Buzz appeared curious.

Dira blinked in surprise. “Matches for my kind do not come along easily. I will wait here until he arrives. In the mean time, I can help others’ relationships along their way by providing comfortable and private accommodations.”

Ezzy had to know, “How long have you been here?”

“Two hundred years, three, I hardly remember. I will be here as long as I

need to be or until I feel the need to go elsewhere.”

The calm resignation that Dira would wait as long she needed to until her mate arrived was impressive. Ezzy’s heart ached for the loneliness in the other woman’s expression.

Ezzy reached out and took Dira’s hand. A spark of power jumped from Dira’s hand to hers. “I do apologize. That happens if I get too emotional. The power surge will wear off soon.”

Ezzy rubbed her fingers together. “What do you mean, power surge?”

“Your shift will be faster, your body stronger for a few years.”

Buzz blinked. “Years?”

“Well, it isn’t much time for one like

me. Since I have been out of the world for so long, time has reduced in meaning for me.” Dira smiled and got to her feet. “I will wish you both good journey and a happy and long life. Thank you for coming to the Open Heart Bed and Breakfast.”

Dira disappeared and the dishes went with her.

Ezzy blinked and got to her feet. “I know a dismissal when I get one. Do we have time to go to the avian hostel to get my things?”

“Of course. Shall we?” He offered her his arm and retrieved his bag from the stand by the door. Together, they exited the building and slowly made



their way to the hostels.

It took her under two minutes to get her bag and return to Buzz. When she was at his side once again, they walked straight to the Meditation Centre. After hearing that Ezzy wanted to see Krisia, Teal took Tony's hand, and together, they moved Buzz and Ezzy directly to the home of the Guild Master.

Ezzy swayed against Buzz, and he kept his arm around her waist. He raised his hand and knocked on the huge double doors in front of them.

A short, wizened man opened the door and looked at them with a jaded expression. "Hello?"

"I am here to see Krisia."

"Madame Krisia is not available to

see clients. You will have to come back another time.” The man started to close the door, but Buzz stopped it with a clawed paw.

Ezzy cleared her throat. “Tell Kris that Ezzy is here to see her, and see what she says. I will wait in the entryway.”

They pushed in and settled themselves in the foyer. The butler frowned in displeasure, but he scuttled away.

A flash of light made Ezzy blink, and to her astonishment, an angry angel was staring down at her. “Krisia is not well enough for guests.”

Ezzy put her astonishment aside and scowled back at him. “Listen, sport, I am

Ezmerelda Atkinson. I have known Kris since we were six, and I am not going to let you stop me from talking to her.”

“You are Ezzy?” The man frowned.

Buzz cleared his throat. “Cut the crap, Tobias, and let her in. She is mad enough to punch past you if you keep up with the bouncer crap.”

“Buzz, I thought that was you. Why are you with my mate’s best friend?”

Ezzy cleared her throat. “Good, you know each other. Where is Kris?”

Tobias extended his right arm.

“Down the hall, fourth room on the left. Your touch will unlock the door. Just a warning, she is still weak from the attack last night, so don’t let her exert herself.”

Ezzy turned to Buzz, but he gave her

a quick kiss before she could speak. “Go to her. I will be here when you are ready.”

She smiled brightly at him and ran to find her friend, secure that he would still be there when she returned.

## Chapter Eleven

Knowing that Kris was bound to be in a bad mood, she knocked first. “Kris? It’s me, Ezzy. I am coming in.”

She was barely in the door of the ultra-feminine room when Kris’s arms wrapped around her and held her tight. “Oh thank the rotating spectrum that you are all right.”

“Glad to see you too. You look really pale. Maybe you should sit.” Ezzy was concerned. Krisia was usually pale, but not like this.

“Did Tobias tell you to keep me on my butt?” Kris scowled.

“No, your grey pallor told me that. Sit your ass down.” Ezzy took her by the

hand and shoved her into a comfortable chair covered with rose-embroidered flowers.

She hauled over a matching chair and poured Kris a cup of tea. “Now, what are you doing here?”

Kris smiled weakly. “Well, you see... Tobias is my mate.”

Ezzy sat back and whistled. “I know how my people do it, so I know it can be sudden, but how long have you known that Tobias was your mate?”

“Ten years or so.”

Astonishment must have shown on her face, because Kris laughed. “The secrecy pact was quite the downer. I knew that Tobias Orcross was my mate the day he took his position as Guild

Master.”

“Whoa. Why the wait to join him?”  
Ezzy had to know. “If I had met my mate years ago, you can bet I would be with him, and you and I would be burning up the phone lines.”

Kris sighed. “Well, there was the little matter of Tobias being sealed to the community in a public ceremony.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“The ceremony involved public sex with a member of the community or with Tobias’s mate.”

“Oh. Not cool.”

“No, so since I have a few really whacky food allergies, I went out and picked some specific items from the

buffet to give myself hives, and to ensure it, I went out and rolled in the local poison ivy patch.”

“Oh my. I remember that. I brought you calamine and oatmeal for two weeks. I just thought you had a family camping disaster.”

Kris sighed, “Well, speaking of family. Guess who was my stand-in during the public screwing?”

Ezzy knew the expression on Kris’s face. “Your cousin?”

“My cousin volunteered the moment that it was apparent my body was no longer a suitable vessel for the goddess.”

Ezzy took her friend’s hand. “You regret your hesitation.”



“Yes and no. I have a little of my grandmother’s foresight, and it was not time for me to settle down with Tobias, but at the same time...why did it have to be her?”

“If there is anything I have learned since you sent me to the Crossroads, it is that destiny will move in its own time. Fighting fate can get you smacked, but doing the right thing feels like there was no other option in the universe.”

Kris smiled, “What is he like?”

“He’s a bear.”

“Grumpy?”

“No, an actual bear. He is a bear like I am an owl.”

“Ouch, how does sex work?”

“The same as it does for you, hot and messy. It is better without the fangs, claws and fur though.” She pulled down the neckline of her shirt to show her friend the red markings on her chest.

“Wow, so you are always feathers when you shift, he is always fur. Would you like to chance a meeting in the middle?” Kris had a calculating look.

“Oh, no, we are talking about you and Tobias. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“How could I, with our pact in place? It was killing me to know that when I told you, I would have to leave, move in with Tobias, but because of our pact, I couldn't tell you.”

“You can tell me now, so tell me now. You love him, don’t you?”

Kris sighed. “I do. I have since I was a teen. I found out he was my mate one day before he was announced as Guild Master. I never had a chance to get used to the idea.”

“He looks like a pissed-off angel.”

Kris grinned. “That is his normal face when he is talking about me. Generally, he is amazing to look at. I want to take up painting every time I see him with a calm expression.”

“When are you going to formalize your union?”

“This evening. When are you going to publicise yours?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t told anyone yet. Usually, it is within the first week of mating so that the families can register any complaints right away, but I don’t know how it works with Crossroads couples.”

“I can help with that. We can have a double ceremony. We need one witness from your clan, one from his.”

The door opened, and Tobias entered with Buzz.

Ezzy got to her feet and put an arm around Buzz’s waist. “Krisia, my best friend, my entire life, this is Buzz, also known as Edgar Northrup. He lives in Alaska, so I hope that you can transport yourself as easily as you did me.”

“Oh, I can.”

Tobias frowned. “You will gain my permission first.”

Ezzy put her hand between them.

“She will tell you when she is going to visit me. And you will tell her when you expect her back. Kris has suggested a joint ceremony. Do you have any objections, Buzz?”

Buzz put his lips to her neck, “As long as I am being bonded to you, I don’t care.”

Kris nodded. “Fine. Tobias, I will bond to you—bring me one of my relatives, one of Ezzy’s and one of Buzz’s.”

The man who radiated power froze.

“That is it? That is all you want before you will solemnize our joining?”

“Well, and whatever you want, but basically, yup. Move.” She waved him away, and Ezzy was amazed at her friend’s casual dismissal of the man of power.

Tobias looked at Ezzy with a smile that turned his face into one of unearthly beauty. “Thank you for coming. Next time, when she says she wants to speak to you, I will bring you to her.”

He disappeared in a rush of light, and Ezzy blinked to clear her vision. She looked up at Buzz, “You really don’t mind formalizing it here?”

“Well, we will still have to register formally in the human world, but that is

only paperwork. This is a melding of souls so that I may hear you and you me when we wear the other shapes.”

Kris cleared her throat. “Ezzy?”

“Yes, Kris?”

“Can I see your other shape? I have never seen it close up.”

“I will have to remove my clothing. Is that okay?”

Kris blinked in surprise. “Of course.”

Ezzy grinned at Buzz and kicked her shoes off. “Shifters think of casual nudity as a step to the next phase, like putting on or taking off a winter coat.”

She shimmied out of her jeans and her top, quickly stripped off her bra and

panties. Buzz held all of her clothing as she disrobed, and his heated gaze made the shift to owl form far more rapid than it should be.

She flapped her wings a few times and perched on the arm of Kris's chair. She preened and stretched her neck as much as she could.

Buzz helped her friend. "You can pet her. She likes it. Just go with the feathers. Going the other way is bad."

Kris stroked her breast and marvelled at the softness of her feathers. "It is amazing."

Ezzy opened her wings to show off a little more, and Kris laughed. "It's like you are wearing a trench coat when you do that."



Clacking her beak, she expressed her irritation. She tucked her wings back against her body and stared at Kris with her owl's gaze. She blinked. Shock rippled through her shifted form as she saw the truth of her childhood friend. Every inch of Krisia rippled with power. Waves of it came off her, changed direction and crashed back against her skin.

Amazed, Ezzy made a few soft sounds, ruffling her feathers and stretching her neck as her friend stroked her between her eyes.

“I know what you are seeing, Ezzy. Thankfully, you can't see it with your human eyes, or our little promise would

never have made it past my turning sixteen. That is when I became the Transporter Guild Master.”

A thousand questions ran through Ezzy's head, but a slow stroke down her feathers sent the questions to the back of her mind. She sat and let her friend touch her soft feathers while the questions of the moment were pushed aside. She was seeing Krisia as she truly was, and Kris was seeing her. There was no hiding from the ones you loved.

## Chapter Twelve

Performing the joining ceremony for Kris and Tobias was surreal, but Ezzy followed her friend's instructions to the letter in front of the witnesses that Tobias had summoned.

“As destiny has called you, so you shall answer. Krisia Margaret Vehn, I do hereby bind you for life and beyond to Tobias Christopher Orcross. You shall respect him as your Guild Master and cleave to him in everything else.”

Ezzy reached out and placed Kris's hand on top of Tobias's. She bound them together with silver chain.

“As duty has called you, so you shall answer. Tobias Christopher Orcross, I

do hereby bind you for life and beyond to Krisia Margaret Vehn. You shall respect her as the Transport Guild Master and cleave to her in all other matters.”

As she bound the next hands together, she felt a surge of that power that Dira had mentioned. She throttled it back, but it kept rising.

“Those assembled now witness, the bond has been created, and once consummated, it shall mark the heavens.”

As instructed, Ezzy placed her hands over the chains, and she lost control of the power at that moment.

The spark of energy jumped from her to Krisia and back again. The silvery

chains disappeared and became part of the joined hands.

Kris's eyes widened in surprise, and Tobias's immediately followed. "What did you do?"

Ezzy looked to the assembled, then shrugged and focussed back on the couple. "A shifter in the Crossroads zapped me with some power. She said it would dissipate after a few years. I wasn't expecting it to jump out now."

Kris looked at the silvery tracing on her hand and smiled. "Well, I was hoping for an old fashioned-type of wedding. This definitely qualifies."

Tobias nodded. "I suppose so, though no one has worn this kind of mark

for centuries.”

Ezzy blinked, “It was a very old shifter.”

“Then that explains it, though not exactly the nature of the gift.” Tobias straightened.

Kris cleared her throat, and Ezzy remembered the final part of the ceremony.

“And so I pronounce Krisia and Tobias formally bound to one another and to the power of the world beneath our feet. May they live long and share their joy and power with all around them.”

A cheer rang out from the magic users as power flared between Tobias and Krisia until the light filled the room.

Ezzy stepped back and joined Buzz in the gathered crowd. He took her hand, and they watched while Kris and Tobias leaned in for their first kiss.

Ezzy could feel the attraction between her friend and the man who held her as if she was a piece of fine porcelain. She leaned against Buzz and listened to the steady thump of his heart. As long as they lived, if she could hear that thudding metronome in her ear, she would know that her world was all right.

Once the kiss of joining was over, Kris smiled up at her new mate with a slow smile that bloomed out of her heart and spread across every inch of her body.

Ezmerelda had seen that smile once before, the day that they made the silence pact and agreed that nothing that happened in their other lives would come between them. Kris's young face had had that same smile.

Buzz whispered, "You think that she will be happy?"

"I think that her smile will blind the universe. Yes, she will be happy, and she will drag me along for the ride."

The new couple turned and went to sign the legal documents that would bind them in the human world, and when that was done, Kris turned, and smiled at Ezzy. "Your turn."

Ezmerelda stood with her sister



Doria behind her, facing Edgar and his sister Ystine. Edgar wore a bearskin wrap and nothing else. Ezmerelda wore a cloak made of owl feathers.

Krisia was wearing a long robe covered with embroidered symbols and had an air of power around her.

“When shifters come together, they usually form alliances on lines of commonality, but when two souls call to each other across the universe, there is no other course but to bind two dissimilar bodies into one union.

Ezmerelda, you have flown through night and day, still and storm. Your wings are part of you, and you need them every moment of every day.

“Edgar, your fur and claws have

taken you through forests, over rocks and mountains, in the trees and through the rivers. Your fur protects you and is a part of you in everything that you do. You cannot separate yourself from your bear, as Ezzy cannot separate from her owl.

“This is not something that can be done often, but if you will allow me to gift to you, I offer you equality.”

The crowd of magic users gasped, but Tobias merely smiled.

Ezzy looked at Buzz and grinned. “I will take it. I will remove my owl and accept a bear in its place.”

“I will remove my bear and take wings instead.”

Krisia smiled, “Neither of you need lose what you are. I am offering you more. Take my hands, and be bound to each other for eternity.”

Ezzy took Buzz’s left hand with her right and reached for Krisia’s right with her left. Buzz did the same, and power raced through the circuit around and around until every part of Ezzy was tingling and glowing with power that she wanted to focus.

Krisia released their hands.

Ezzy looked up into Buzz’s eyes, and she felt the energy of a shift take her over. Her skin tingled as fur sprouted, and in a moment, she was on all fours, a bear in an owl cloak.

Buzz disappeared, and the heap of bear cloak puddled on the floor with a lump under it. Ezzy lifted the edge of the cloak with her paw, being very careful not to crush the owl under it.

A great grey owl popped out, hooted and extended his wings. A few flaps sent more fur than air moving, so Ezzy tried to shift into her owl form, and it came to her.

She had both shapes now.

She moved back to human and extended her hand to Buzz. He nipped, but she was fast. “Flying takes practice, Buzz. I promise to help you learn, but for now, we might want to formalize our bonding and sign the marriage license.”

The crowd laughed as Buzz quickly shifted back to his human form. He tucked her back into her cloak before putting his own on. His erection was intent, but the expanse of the cloak concealed it handily.

Smiling, they came together in a kiss. Parted, she bit the fleshy part of his thumb and he did the same for her. Blood was exchanged, and the kiss was repeated.

“My life to your life, your body to mine.” Their words were spoken in unison.

The moment that the documents were signed, Ezzy and Buzz were transported to their new home so that Krisia and

Tobias could enjoy the physical part of their bonding.

Standing in an unfamiliar place, Ezzy went against her normal reflex and dropped the owl cloak. The expanse of open air that she could see through a huge floor-to-ceiling window called to her. “This is amazing.”

He came up behind her and wrapped her in his arms, pressing one hand over her belly and one over her breasts. “I am glad you like it. The back looks out on the forest, the front on the valley. You can teach me to fly out there.”

She chuckled and placed her hands over his. “You are going to have to back it up, Buzz. It takes months to learn to fly. I will start you with owl preschool,

and you can respond by teaching me how to walk on all fours. It was really quite awkward to try and move everything at once.”

“I will show you how to manage your limbs. It is really easy once you get used to it.” He lifted her and put her bare feet on top of his. “Left, right, left, right.”

She was giggling madly as he walked with her straight into the bedroom.

Two hours later, she sighed as she listened to his heartbeat slow once again. “Yeah, you certainly know just how to help me move.”

He lifted her hand to his lips. “You

are an inspiring subject. How do you think your friend is getting on with her new mate?”

One wall of the bedroom was made of glass. Ezzy looked out over the wild pattern in the aurora borealis, and she smiled, “I think she is getting along just fine. I hope you like visitors—Kris was never one to stand on ceremony.”

“If she makes you happy, then I am happy. Tobias will just have to get used to her coming and going as she chooses.”

“Kris has a strong independent streak, but she is the best friend a woman could ask for.” Ezzy trailed her fingers across his chest. “She gave us quite a gift. Most new couples don’t start on equal footing, but she got us as close



as she could.”

“If flying is as difficult as it seems, I think I would have preferred that she got us a toaster.” Buzz’s resigned voice made her giggle, and she kept it up until he rolled on top of her once again.

Looking up into his dark brown eyes, she couldn’t stop her smile. “I can also show you the finer points of sex in midair. It is usually an eagle thing, but once you get the hang of it, I hear it is quite the rush.”

“I will settle for being able to follow you through the skies.”

She didn’t have a reply for him, because he pressed his lips to hers and rolled over to his back, taking her with

him and coaxing her knees to either side of him.

Ezzy was sore, but she welcomed the slide of him within her. They moved together on the first night of their new lives, and as she dug her nails into his chest, he growled long and low. The vibration went through his body, and as he quivered inside her, she bucked and shrieked a hunting cry into the air.

Their bodies were lit by the dance of magical radiation outside as their hearts slowed and matched their beats.

## Epilogue

Krisia sat and watched Tobias pronounce the sentence on the coyotes who had attacked her and broken the sanctity of the Crossroads.

“You have broken the pact between the Transporters and the shifters, and for that you, your family, anyone of your bloodline and your descendants for three generations are forbidden from using the Crossroads or seeking help from one of our kind.”

The two cousins stood wide-eyed, their pack leader was grim, and Anders was curled around his crushed arm. They had healed it to the point where it would heal itself in human fashion, but

no further.

The pack leader stepped forward. “I understand the ruling, but is there a way to punish the guilty without taking it out on all of his relatives?”

Tobias leaned back, and Krisia pressed her hand on his shoulder. He covered her hand with his. “There is one way. If the one who committed the offence is removed from this world, the curse we have put into effect will cease. His two assistants will merely have to be removed from the gene pool. Those are our terms. When this has come to pass, the curse will lift. Until then, your pack and Anders’s relations will be under this restriction. Are we clear?”

The pack leader bowed and jerked

his head for the cousins to pick up Anders. “We are clear.”

“Good, when it is done, your people will be able to find Transporters and Healers again. Good afternoon.”

Krisia lifted her head and dismissed the coyotes back to their pack home. Anders wouldn't survive the night.

“Thank you for the lenience. It is better to have the shifters handle their own deaths. They know where to put the bodies.” Kris kissed Tobias's cheek.

“I should have just killed him.”

“They need to know that they cannot abuse the Transporters. I have not been the only one molested in the last six years. They take the privilege for

granted. It is a sacred rite, not a carnival ride.”

Her mate laughed. “So, you don’t intend to install a permanent door between the Guild house and your friend’s home?”

Kris snorted. “Of course I do.”

He tugged her into his lap, and she looked up at him with an innocent expression. It took a lot of nerve to stare down an angel, but she was getting all the practice she could handle.

“You will have to tell me where you are going, you know. If you don’t, I will come after you and that might interrupt girl time.”

Kris shut him up with a kiss to his perfect mouth. She would tell him when

she was going to Ezzy's and when she was coming back, but she had other clients that destiny was calling, and if they couldn't come to her, she would go to them.

## Author's Note

The mystery of Buzz's name will be answered in book two, Lion Time.

Krisia has a plan to help women who have a problem getting to a Transporter, and Ezzy is helping every step of the way.

Perhaps someone should tell Tobias what is going on? Nahhh. He had ten years to figure out what he was getting into.

Thank you for joining me in the Crossroads. I hope you have enjoyed your time there.

Zenina Masters

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## About the Author

Zenina Masters was born in Canada and lives in Canada. She has a regular job and does nothing particularly exciting with her life. She enjoys fishing, silence and the ability to pick and choose friends she can trust. Life is too short to watch your back all the time.

Her writing life is a teeny bit of escapism, she would probably chicken out if confronted by three naked men and looks forward to one day finding out.